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**Book lover donates mammoth collection
60,000 works going to University of Alberta**

Fri Oct 5 2007

By Meghan Hurley



PHIL HOSSACK / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Chester Cuthbert's collection is thought to be worth almost \$1 million.

AFTER Chester Cuthbert fell in love with a science fiction book at the age of 12, he couldn't stop collecting novels.

His inaugural attraction to *The Ship of Ishtar* by A. Merritt led to a passion that began to consume his life, he said.

"Collecting is sort of a disease, you know," Cuthbert said. "When you're collecting books there's no end to it."

Now 94 years old, he has donated his collection of around 60,000 books to the University of Alberta. They are estimated to be worth almost \$1 million.

Cuthbert's son Ray, the middle child of five, remembers when his father moved the book collection into their River Heights home a week before the family brought their belongings.

When the family moved in, the two oldest children were surprised to find a basement they thought would be a good play room was covered in books, Ray Cuthbert said Thursday.

"We were seeing a collection of

books totally engulf and overwhelm a house," he said.

In the 1930s, Cuthbert even attempted to become a science fiction author. He had two stories published but knew that making a living as a creative writer was almost impossible.

Instead, he worked at an insurance company for 37 years. When he retired, he worked at a bookstore once a week. But instead of earning a paycheck, Cuthbert was paid in books, his son said. Cuthbert used to read an average of 130 books a year.

Cuthbert used to have a group of science fiction fans over every Saturday afternoon in the 1970s to talk about books and life experiences. That group included former Winnipegger and future University of Alberta librarian Randy Reichardt. He was one of two librarians that flew to Winnipeg to help pack up Cuthbert's 60,000 books.

When the librarians arrived, the basement was packed with boxes piled almost as high as the ceiling. Small pathways were created so Cuthbert could find his way through the maze of books.

"I couldn't believe how many boxes we moved out of here," said Merril Distad, associate director of libraries for the University of Alberta. "We had around three five-tonne trucks leave on the first day we were here."

By the time all of the boxes are packed, Distad expects to see around 100 pallets of boxes that will eventually be shipped to Edmonton. The collection also includes fantasy literature and books on psychic phenomena.

Along with the books, the university will also be taking hundreds of thousands of book reports that Cuthbert wrote. He wouldn't just move onto the next book without writing down his comments.

After Cuthbert's wife of 62 years, Muriel, died last year, he thought it was time to give up his science fiction collection, his son said.

"She had to live around the books and that space kept getting smaller and smaller," Cuthbert's son joked. "But she put up with it in a gracious manner."

Cuthbert's son contacted the University of Alberta, which expressed interest in the collection several years ago.

When the university was told in January it could adopt the books, the librarians were thrilled, Cuthbert's son said.

"It's going to strengthen our collection," Reichardt said. "Pop culture has become a popular study on university campuses."

A new science fiction collection might even attract new staff and faculty to the university, he added.

The books aren't being donated to Winnipeg universities because they don't have the staff to catalogue 60,000 books or the space to hold them, Cuthbert's son said.

A picture of Cuthbert will be inside every book with a caption that reads Chester D. Cuthbert Collection.

It might take a few years until all of the books are catalogued and ready to be checked out, Distad said.

But once the collection is ready, they will be overwhelmed with requests for the books, he said.

"We have the field of dreams theory," Distad said. "If we build it, people will come."

meghan.hurley@freepress.mb.ca



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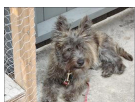

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